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DIVERS VISITING SULAWESI ARE LIKELY TO BE HEADING FOR LEMBEH AND BUNAKEN IN THE NORTH OR WAKATOBI IN THE SOUTH, BUT NESTLED IN CENTRAL SULAWESI'S HUGE TOGIAN GULF IS THE LESS WELL-KNOWN WALEA RESORT. IT HAS EVERYTHING DIVERS COULD WANT: AMAZINGLY HEALTHY CORALS, FANTASTIC HOUSE REEF AND INTERESTING CRITTERS. THIS STUNNING REMOTE LOCATION EVEN HAS A PYGMY SEAHORSE SPECIES FOUND NOWHERE ELSE.

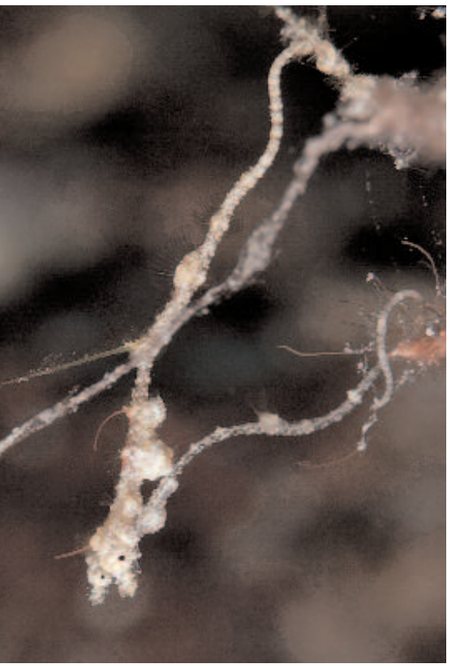
TOGIAN TREASURES

The Togian islands are located in central Sulawesi, which was formed millions of years ago when land-masses splintered off the Asian and Australian continents and collided in the middle of Indonesia. These eclectic origins bought together a wealth of underwater and terrestrial riches and help to explain the presence of many unusual and unique land creatures that rafted here from their continents of origin. Four species of macaque monkey, the Babirusa (a deer-like pig) and nearly 90 endemic species of birds are found on the island.

I came to Walea Resort to observe the Walea soft coral pygmy seahorse known only from the Togian islands and was discovered by one of the resort's dive guides. It was scientifically described in March 2009, given the name *Hippocampus waleananus*. As its common name suggests it's found living exclusively with the abundant beige soft corals found in the surface 20 metres or so of the area. It is really a spectacular pygmy with a pale pink, yellow or brownish colouration and smattering of white spots over its surface. It has a much longer tail than the other pygmies, allowing it to grasp the variable branches of the soft coral. It is also much more active than other pygmies, often undertaking relatively epic journeys from one side of it's host to another by free swimming. As well as the Walea pygmy, the reefs also accommodate the relatively more common Bargibant's, Denise's and Pontoh's pygmies.

I was astounded by the visibility when I visited in October; the water was as clear blue as I've ever seen. It is probably such clarity that's created the stunning hard

Top left- A goby and bumblebee shrimp share a sea cucumber host
Main - Two starry nudibranchs *Glossodoris stellatus* feeding on their favourite sponge



This page - The hairy squat lobster found living on the surface of large barrel sponges; Hairy yellow hermit crab *Aniculus maximus;* A pair of *Kyonemichthys rumengani* pipehorses courting; The boxer crab holding its protective anemones

> I CAME PRIMARILY FOR THE ENDEMIC PYGMY SEAHORSE AND WASN'T DISAPPOINTED; IT'S A HIGHLY ENTERTAINING, BEAUTIFUL AND INTERESTING SPECIES THAT YOU SIMPLY CAN'T SEE UNLESS YOU COME TO THIS SPECIAL CORNER OF THE WORLD.

coral gardens in the area. Whereas sponges, soft and gorgonian corals take their nourishment from the water column by trapping or filtering plankton, hard stony corals derive most of their energy from the sun's light. The tiny algae residing within the tissues of corals and providing them with energy require plentiful sunlight to photosynthesise like plants on land and thus need clear water.

Walea's daily dive schedule is two boat dives in the morning, back to the resort for lunch and then a third dive on the House Reef. The jetty leads from the shore directly to the reef dropoff so House Reef dives couldn't be easier. The staff prepare your gear in advance – all you have to do is show up, gear up, then giant stride straight onto the dive site. It is a very easy dive with no current with plenty to keep you occupied for a good 70 minutes. As it's dived so frequently the guides know exactly where to take you for certain critters. The Walea soft coral pygmy is usually in residence as well as the recently-described pygmy pipehorse *Kyonemichthys rumengani*, not unlike a long slender pygmy. It's around three centimetres long and very thin, beige in colour and with long red filaments on the head and back. I even saw two courting one afternoon. The site is great for snorkelling and the benign conditions are perfect for non-divers. I snorkeled between dives one afternoon and a large school of big-eye trevally checked me out plus 60 or so bumphead parrotfish chomped on the reef just below me!

One of my favourite sites was Pasir Putih (translated as white sand from Indonesian) and was full of unusual crustacean delights. I've done hundreds of dives in Indonesia and only ever seen one bumblebee shrimp, which as their name suggests are tiny black and yellow banded shrimp. At Pasir Putih we saw a dozen on one sea cucumber and eight on another. The cucumbers were quite large and the shrimps scurried over the surface as their host continued munching through the sand, unperturbed by its tiny hitchhikers. We also saw a rare boxer crab at this site; a species known for the anemones that it sticks to both pincers. It's an ornate crab in its own right, but the sight of the little creature swaying back and forth shaking the anemones like a crazed cheerleader is very comical!

If the reef's smaller residents aren't your cup of tea, there's plenty to entertain big fish enthusiasts. At certain sites the normally tropical balmy waters can turn chilly when upwellings of cold nutrient-rich currents are pushed against the reef and rise towards the surface. Here the visibility drops, there's a shift to soft coral dominated reefs and the number of fish is much greater than at other sites. The currents are generally stronger here and the occasional shark punctuates the fish soup. I saw three shark species on one dive at a site named Gegolan, which is sadly quite a rarity in Indonesia these days. Large solitary and schooling trevally plus tuna frequent these reefs, making quite an exciting and invigorating dive.

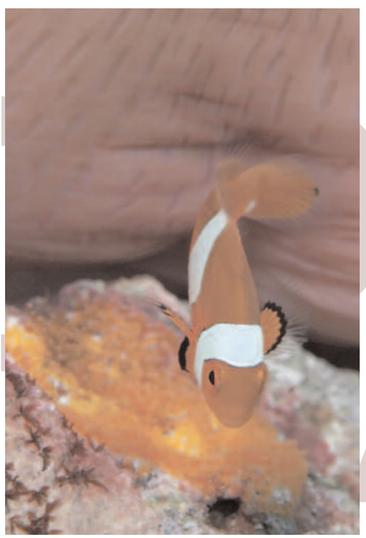
The food at the resort is amazing. The three courses are an Italian-Indonesian fusion and each dish is explained in Italian and English as you might expect at a top restaurant in a European capital city, not a tiny island in the Togian islands! Pasta is made fresh daily and all ingredients are either purchased locally, brought in from the mainland or for those special delicacies Indonesia just doesn't have, they're imported straight from Italy, New Zealand or Australia. My mouth is watering just thinking about it all.

There are plenty of activities to keep you occupied either on a de-gas day before flying, or an afternoon off. Each week an expedition is scheduled to the tip of

This page - A magnificent nudibranch *Ardeadoris egretta;* A large candy crab on a soft coral; A huge barrel sponge is inspected by a dwarfed dive guide; The Walea soft coral pygmy seahorse *Hippocampus waleananus* found only in the Togian Gulf; A false clown anemonefish tending to a fresh clutch of eggs. The eggs become darker as the embryos inside matures.

the island. The resort owns the entire peninsula on which it's situated and a walk to the point takes an hour or so along the beach and through a coconut grove. A small hillock at the point gives an amazing view over the shallow reefs that extend some way off. A picnic lunch is prepared and set up in a secluded bay before the staff take you back to the resort by boat. The perfect thing after this walk is the stunning spa on the hillside next to the resort. There are two well trained masseuses with an amazing range of treatments plus a Jacuzzi if you fancy relaxing with a drink after a hard day!

The reefs around Walea are outstanding and should continue to be so due to the resort's reef protection program, which has been drafted along with local communities and includes a ranger who polices the reefs daily to ensure no damaging fishing practices such as dynamite or cyanide take place. This initiative is also vital for the conservation of the Walea pygmy seahorse. Biologists recognise that species most at risk from extinction are those with specialised habits found in a small geographic area. The Walea pygmy ticks both of these boxes, being found only on certain soft corals and exclusively within the Togian Gulf.



Walea is an excellent spot both for avid divers and their families thanks to the great snorkelling, spa, walking tours and other activities. The hard coral gardens remain in pristine condition and the great visibility makes for one of the most memorable underwater landscapes imaginable. This is truly stuff from the editing room of *National Geographic*! I came primarily for the endemic pygmy seahorse and wasn't disappointed; it's a highly entertaining, beautiful and interesting species that you simply can't see unless you come to this special corner of the world. The amazing quality of diving around Walea was an unexpected bonus!

Walea Dive Resort and house reef

GETTING THERE – Walea is best accessed through Makassar (Ujung Pandang), then by a domestic flight to Luwuk in Central Sulawesi several times a week. Resort staff will meet you in Luwuk and transfer you to the resort, via car and fast boat.

BEST TIME TO GO – Conditions are suitable for diving and the resort is open year round.

OPERATORS – Walea Resort

> LINK www.Walea.com

TOGIAN TREASURES

Walea Resort was founded by three intrepid Italians who went in search of a place to establish a dive centre. Their stipulations were healthy corals, diverse reefs and topside scenery matching the riches below water. They decided to investigate the Togian Islands in a small local boat with ample supplies. A few weeks into the trip they reached a densely forested peninsula on Waleabahi Island, with white sand beaches and amazing reefs and immediately knew this was the spot. Welcoming its first guests in 1998, a tent pitched on the beach has evolved into a high standard resort for 30 guests in individual beach bungalows, with amazing Italian-Asia cuisine the likes of which you're unlikely to find outside Italy. There's also a luxury spa with Jacuzzi, a sunset jetty bar and, most importantly, a great house reef.